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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: CODEL DODD MEETS WITH SUMATE LEADERS

REF: A. CARACAS 3956

[1](#)B. CARACAS 3944

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor,
for Reasons 1.4(b).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Maria Corina Machado and Roberto Abdul, leaders of the NGO Sumate, briefed CODEL Dodd on January 10 on future plans of the electoral advocacy group. Machado lamented the tightening control President Hugo Chavez now held over Venezuela's branches of government, especially the National Electoral Council. She said that despite the setback of losing the August 2004 referendum to recall Chavez, Sumate is moving forward with training for many of its 40,000 volunteers. Sumate leaders said they will continue to seek financial support from the National Endowment for Democracy and USAID, though they are looking for resources -- and at least moral support -- from other governments and foreign organizations. Machado denied that Sumate had aspirations to become a political party, still hopeful that opposition parties will find a candidate to beat Chavez in the 2006 elections. End summary.

Sumate Briefs Codel

[1](#)2. (C) Maria Corina Machado and Roberto Abdul, leaders of the Venezuelan NGO Sumate, met with Senators Christopher Dodd (D-CT), Lincoln Chafee (R-RI), and William Nelson (D-FL) at the Ambassador's residence on January 10. Also present were Senate Foreign Relations Staffer Janice O'Connell, Dodd Staffer Jonathan Pearl, Nelson Staffer Dan McLaughlin, and Chafee Staffer Deborah Brayton. Machado described Sumate as a group of concerned citizens, mostly professionals, who came together in 2002 to promote an electoral solution to Venezuela's political crisis, namely, the recall referendum against President Hugo Chavez. Without Sumate, Machado asserted, the referendum would not have occurred. Machado said political rights in Venezuela are more vulnerable than ever now that Chavez has control of all branches of government. The National Electoral Council (CNE) is so blatantly politicized, she said, that opposition voters have lost faith in Venezuela's electoral system and may opt out of future elections. Machado said the NGO is now advocating steps to restore credibility to the CNE, such as auditing the voter registry and naming new CNE directors through the constitutional method (ref a). Abdul noted that Sumate also plans to widen its watchdog mission to other measures of democratic rule such as judicial autonomy or public spending.

[1](#)3. (C) After the defeat in the referendum, Machado said, volunteer participation in Sumate dropped off. Interest later returned, she added, as the dithering of political parties have failed to inspire participation in them. Noting that Sumate has some 40,000 members nationwide, Machado said that in the first half of 2005 they plan to provide training on human rights and the Constitution to 27,000 people. (Note: Abdul later told poloff this training is a continuation of a project financed by National Endowment for Democracy (NED). End note.)

Financing and Travel

[1](#)4. (C) Asked by Senator Dodd about financing sources, Abdul said that 95 percent of Sumate's funding comes from Venezuelan individuals and companies. Machado said donations have become scarcer as GOV intimidation tactics against contributors have increased. She alleged, for example, that some companies have been raided by the tax service (SENIAT) as retribution for supporting Sumate. On foreign financing, Abdul said that Sumate had received \$31,000 from NED and an

additional \$53,000 from USAID. Senator Dodd encouraged Sumate to seek international financing from non-U.S. sources

so that Chavez cannot credibly label Sumate as a USG-backed organization. Machado contended that foreign financing for NGOs is legal, despite the GOV's contention to the contrary, and that Sumate will continue to apply for NED and other grants, lest it appear they were conceding the point to the GOV.

15. (C) Machado said Sumate representatives are planning several trips to seek foreign support as well as to learn from other countries that have survived threats to democratic rule. She attributed foreign governments' reluctance to provide funding to Sumate to a wrong perception of the Venezuelan political conflict or economic interests in the country. Senator Dodd suggested Sumate approach Spain and Brazil as a way to reach Europe and Latin America, respectively. When Machado said the Zapatero government's warming up to Chavez is complicating contact in Spain, Dodd offered to help with his own contacts in the U.S.-Spain Council. Machado said they received an invitation from the Canadian foreign ministry to visit Ottawa the last week of January. She noted that the courts investigating the events of April 2002 have imposed a restriction on her international travel (though the judge allowed her to go to France for Christmas vacation). Machado said she would seek permission nonetheless to travel to Canada; if not forthcoming, she said, other Sumate representatives would make the trip. (Abdul told poloff separately that Sumate representatives are also considering visits to Davos for the World Economic Forum and the Czech Republic, where former Czech President Vacslov Havel has agreed to meet them.)

What's Next For Sumate?

16. (C) Senator Dodd asked whether Sumate had considered becoming a political party given its extensive political activism and infrastructure. Machado rejected the idea, saying Sumate can best serve as an autonomous voice in civil society rather than as a political party. Machado expressed hope that the political parties would regroup and develop a viable alternative to Chavez for the December 2006 presidential elections.

Comment

17. (C) Sumate is the most viable Chavez opponent in Venezuela's political landscape. Its upper-middle class leadership is not linked to the previous political regime. The organization earned its reputation from its superior technical capacity and ability to mobilize people for the various signature drives leading to the referendum. In fact, most of its national leadership are engineers by training. Sumate's credibility makes it a prime target for the GOV as Venezuela enters yet another year of elections. As Sumate seeks to define its post-referendum mission, Machado and company are being careful not to spend their political capital rashly. The more Sumate can diversify its international support -- both moral and financial -- beyond the USG, the more credibility it will have.

17. (U) CODEL Dodd did not have an opportunity to review this message.

Brownfield

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